

Seeing Double

San Jose Taiko and Margaret Wingrove combine Japanese drumming and modern dance

IN A LARGE warehouse, lying in a circle in front of a wall of mirrors, the San Jose Taiko Group drummers prepare for their upcoming concert. The evening begins with a round of exercises, performed to staccato counting in Japanese. Revved up, the drummers grab their instruments—percussion devices ranging in size from oil-drum dimensions to small, hand-held noise-makers. And then the joyous din begins, a syncopated sound that melds traditional Japanese taiko drumming with African, Latin and jazz rhythms.

The group is gearing up for its season finale, a full-length concert at San Jose's Center for the Performing Arts that will feature the premiere of *Zenshin*, a collaboration performed with the Margaret Wingrove Dance Company.

At first it seems an unlikely blend: the ethereal Wingrove dancers, steeped in European traditions, set in motion by the booming rhythms of the actively multicultural San Jose Taiko Group. But the groups share a long history in the San Jose arts scene, a thirst for artistic collaborations and, most important, a feeling for the physical exhilaration that music inspires.

AS THE DRUMMERS prepare for the evening's rehearsal, choreographer Wingrove, artistic coordinator Roy Hirabayashi and general manager P.J. Hirabayashi discuss the upcoming concert. Their collaboration has resulted in *Zenshin*, a three-part dance that reflects the meaning of its title: "spirit moving forward in good heart." Says Wingrove, the piece moves "from tradition through relocation through innovation," telling the story of Japanese Americans in universal terms.

In the first part, the instruments and costumes draw upon the Japanese kabuki traditions; the second, performed in period costumes, recalls the Japanese experience in WWII internment camps;

the final, futuristic part suggests the emergence of a distinct Japanese American culture.

As Wingrove and the Hirabayashis turn their attention to the assembled artists, the taiko drummers prepare to rehearse a segment from *Zenshin*'s second part, in which the drummers all grasp a rope and parade into a series of cubicles that symbolize the camp accommodations. As the members of Taiko Group move into confinement, Wingrove's dancers flit around them, their supple bodies responding to a wistful synthesized soundtrack that evokes the sound of the wind that battered the barren lands where the relocation camps were located.

Zenshin will occupy the first half of the program; the second half, more in line with the Taiko Group's previous concerts, will feature three different musical compositions. The first, an ensemble piece by Kenny Endo, rekindles Endo's experiences on a trip to a New Mexico Indian reservation; following will be Endo's "Symmetrical Sounds," a precision drumming duet that combines jazz and taiko rhythms. The last piece, Russel Baba's "Spirit Drum," described as a "polyrhythmic ballad," brings in more cross-cultural currents.

Collaboration is scarcely new to San Jose Taiko. Last year the taiko drummers provided dramatic rhythms for San Jose Repertory Theatre's *Oedipus the King*; next, they'll be working with musician Jon Jang, storyteller Brenda Wong Aoki and the San Jose Symphony. Yet this collaboration marks an giant step toward the group's goal, according to Roy Hirabayashi, of "broadening the use of taiko, the understanding of taiko as a performance art."

SHARAN STREET

New Visions: A Collaboration takes place Saturday at 8pm at the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts, 255 Almaden Blvd., San Jose. Tickets: \$5-\$23, available through BASS or at the door. (408/293-8922)